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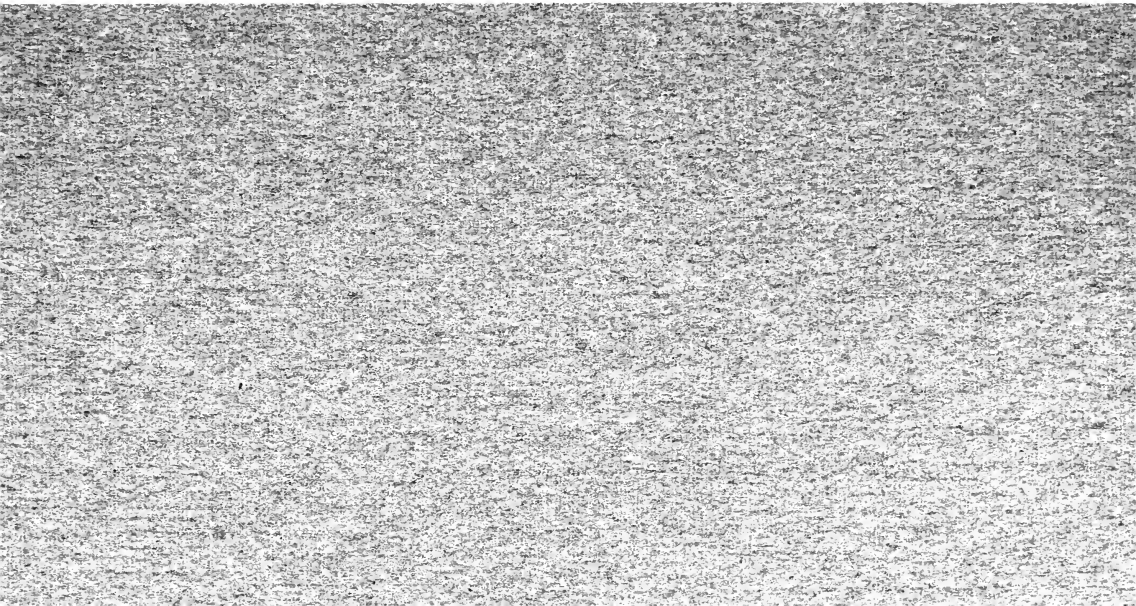

STELLA.

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BY

ELBRIDGE JEFFERSON CUTLER.

BOSTON:
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1868.

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TO

ANNA TEMPLE BROWN,

OF NEW YORK.

STELLA.

THE soldier turned to me and said,
"You ask me why I do not wed?"

My little room is more to me
Than any Old World gallery.
'T is not the cost of gem or stone
That makes the value that I own;
But I have matched with curious care
The charm of shape and color there;
And loving hands with mine have wrought
In subtle sympathy of thought;
Until, where'er I look, I find
Some history of my heart or mind.

Far o'er that hazy sea, the eye
Pursues in vain the amber sky;
And on and on, but cannot fix,
Till clouds and islands intermix;
And near, the cliff severe and gray
Looks down upon the summer play
Of green waves flashing out of blue,
Where Kensett lets the sunlight through.

A forest this, — the clear obscure,
The drawing firm, the color pure;
That moss is wet with last night's rain;
That rock wears its laborious stain:
For Stillman feels the artist's grief,
Who cannot bear to wrong a leaf.

This dark blue vase, — a moulded hymn, —
What ivy creeps around the rim!
Upon its sides what passions throng,
And give to shape the charm of song!

Page made the portrait there of one
As dear to me as any son.
The wondrous arch of the lustrous eye,
The mouth, the smile I know it by,
The tender cheek of swarthy red,
The graceful accent of the head!
He, swept in the stress of war away,
Was fire a moment, and now is clay.

This artful bronze has caught the tone
Of that sweet group in Attic stone
Where Love and Psyche close embrace:
Heart beats on heart, face breathes on face,
Lip melts on melting lip, — and so
They kissed two thousand years ago.

That ball-player is the work of Brown.
Mark how he keeps the action down!
Power not in muscles over-rude,
But in the radiant attitude.

What lines where neck and shoulder join
What liberal moulding of the loin!
See, the full arm upraised to throw
Sets all the statue in a glow!

Upon the chimney there the brand
Fell from a dying colonel's hand.
One moment at his column's head
That glittering life the onset led;
One heart-deep wound, and he was dead.
Leaves from his grave the sword entwine;
No housewife's care shall make it shine;
For every stain 't is doubly mine.

Across the mantle's front, below,
The vintagers after vintage go;
To shrill-blown pipe and tambourine,
They sing and dance and kiss between.
And this two caryatids lift —
Light, tiptoe shapes — the artist's gift.

And there we watched the embers die, —
A soldier he, an idler I;
He, one of those keen souls who crave
A cause to serve, a land to save;
Who court not Fame; on whom she showers —
The wilful maid — her stars and flowers;
I, loving quiet more than storm,
Content to praise while they perform,
By their proud names my children call,
And hang their pictures on my wall.
But we were friends, tried friends and true;
And while we talked of old and new,
The common liberal talk of men,
I put a careless question. Then,
Like him who muses if he ought
To tell to one he trusts his thought,
The soldier turned to me and said,
"You ask me why I do not wed?

"In the bright circle that I knew
I found a friend as dear as you;
Of kindred tastes, of like degree,
In that strange city, all to me.
Our lives were one, our hopes the same;
We shaped a double star of fame;
Each spoke the plainest word to each;
Each taught what only friends can teach.
His father loved me as a son,
No household kindness left undone;
His mother's graces sweet and fine
Made up to me the loss of mine;
And his young sister came to be
Like an own sister unto me.

"Her name was Stella; but because
A fine reserve of social laws
Should guard a maiden's heart and fame,
I never called her by that name;

I never smothered sighs of love,
Nor wore at heart her stolen glove,
Nor pressed too close the hand of snow,
And then forgot to let it go.

"I have to mourn no broken vow,—
But that is cheerless comfort now,—
No promise made by word or sign,
To blast her life and torture mine.
And yet who knows, if there had been
A courtly habit, scarcely sin,—
If I, the moment to amuse,
Had used the forms that gallants use,
And put the maiden to defence,—
That lie were worse than this innocence?

"I know not why,—for she was fair:
Her rich luxuriance of hair
Was brown in sunshine, black in shade,—
A woven witchery of braid;

Hers was the liquid depth of eye
The Cenci holds the ages by;
No dimple marred her rounded cheek;
Her chin was chiselled like the Greek;
But when she spoke, her mouth's sweet grace
Seemed the perfection of her face.
The flawless jewel of her mind
Was worthy to be so enshrined,—
The instinct sure, the reason clear;
At times, a reticence like fear;
At times, of words the simple art
Of those who find them in the heart.

"It is the house upon the square
That fronts the famous statue there:—
A bare-limbed youth on a courser fleet,
His cloak dragged under the restless feet,
His good sword drawn, on his brow a star,
Flames like a god in the van of war.

And here we met, as friends may meet,
To talk the nothings of the street,
To lay before the elder man
The moment's doubt, the trifling plan;
And oft the mother from her book
Would lift a mild approving look,
And Stella point her agile wit
To make delicious fun of it.

"One night we sang a Spanish tune,—
A dream, half moonlight and half June;
And where the wild soprano breaks
Its clear sky-note in blinding flakes
Of fire that hover trembling down,—
Sink thrilling, quivering, fainting, down,
Until they die upon the bass;
The passion of her voice and face
Interpreted the fatal air,
And made me fearfully aware.

"So ended that enchanted time:
She loved me; was her love my crime?
Henceforth, by every art, I sought
To draw my image from her thought;
To spare her woman's pride the blow
My knowledge of her love to know:
That it might pass and leave no stain,
Like vapor from a window-pane.

"Sometimes I felt about my mind
In hope a hidden love to find.
I found a friendship strong and pure,
Prompt both to do and to endure,
And reverence of a sweeter saint
Than utmost art did ever paint.
My life were hers that she might live;
But not a love not mine to give.

"Sometimes by Fancy's lavish spell
I built the house where I would dwell.

In marble watch that never slept,
Two lions at the gateway crept;
I entered through a stately hall
Whose dome a colored light let fall;
I walked at will from room to room
In velvet stillness and purple bloom,
'Neath frescoed roofs, by walls of green,
With golden cornice and crystal sheen,
With pictures, books, and statues rare,
And outlooks into vistas fair, —
A lake, a garden, a wood, a lawn;
And fountains murmured, and summer shone.

"But into my palace, bright as flame,
The image of Stella never came;
Or came a guest for whom I planned
A marvellous feast of fairy-land.
For her I made my liveries shine;
I pledged her in my oldest wine;

I bade my slaves her bower prepare,
Without a thought to enter there.

"And if I tried to find a place
In heart and palace for her face,
She moved about, the sweetest thing
That ever tended flowers in spring;
She ruled her realm with mild command,
And all was order under her hand;
Bred to the inmost arts of life, —
A household angel, but not a wife.

"O, doubly hard our double parts!
Our friends her secret soul divine,
But do not dream the grief of mine;
And, as friends will, by natural arts, —
The match in all things seems so fit, —
Form little plans to compass it.
But months went by, and naught was changed,
I was not won, nor she estranged;

Week after week I went and came,
Still free in thought and act of blame;
But my burden grew too great to bear;
My mind sank under its weary care,
As I saw her lovely cheek grow pale,—
Some way the heart must tell its tale;
And father, mother, brother,— three
Looked with aggrievéd love on me.

"And thus one steady-aching spot
Seemed all my life. I heeded not
Mists veiling in the moral sky
The grand old stars we journey by;
Until the ripened tempest came,
And burst in thunder and in flame.

"The voice of rumor in the street,
The shuffle of impatient feet,
The game forgot, the shop forsook,
The prescient mother's helpless look,

The thoughtless suddenly aware,
The new solemnity of prayer,
The flapping flag, the bugle's cry,
The ill-formed squadron rushing by,
Peril of all worth living for,
Might lord of right, — and this was war.

"'T was not alone the charms that lie
In smiling Honor's kindling eye;
Nor injured Freedom beckoning on
Where her insulted banner shone;
Nor youth's blind yearning, as of wings
Unfolding, after better things: —
Not one, but all conspired for me
To shape the soldier's destiny.

"The sudden summons scarce affords
One little hour for parting words, —
One little hour, too quickly fled,
With all to say, and nothing said.

"Four bleeding years have wrought in vain
To dim that picture of the brain, —
The solemn father's fireside place,
The sorrow of the mother's face,
The brother's hand upon my chair,
And Stella silent, not reposing;
Her pale constraint, her shrunk despair,
The languor of the lily closing.

"The novel tumult of the camp,
The anxious watch, the weary tramp,
And more, the ceaseless care of men,
Restored me to myself again.
And yet a subtle sense of ill
Lived vaguely in my spirit still,
Like the dull soreness of the brain,
Not pain, that follows after pain.

"One night our bivouac fires were lit
Upon a hillside. Fronting it,

A wooded valley stretched away
In mist and darkness, still and gray.
The shapes of men and horses loom
Portentous in the lighted gloom,
And over all, so far, so high,
With watch-fires duly trimmed, the sky.

"And here a comrade came and said,
'A letter, captain,' and I read.

"'She wasted slowly, day by day,
And seemed from life to shrink away;
Within her chamber sat alone,
Forgetting self, and heeding none;
Untended left her little cares;
Shuddered and sighed at unawares.
Vain was all study to beguile
Her malady to song or smile:
Or if she smiled, — would she had wept!
Or sang, — would she had silence kept!

At length she took her bed, and lay,
Her hands among the clothes astray,
The lid half shut upon the eye,
The face, a sculptured vacancy.
Last eve a change seemed drawing on:
We watched all night,—she died at dawn.'"

The soldier turned from me and said,
"You asked me why I did not wed."

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